

Sweetbrier
Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1670

HABS
PA
51-PHILA
35

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM TO
SWEETBRIER
Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1670

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
396-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO:
SWEETBRIER

HABS NO. PA-1670

HABS
PA
51-PHILA,
396-

Location: At the eastern end of Sweetbrier Drive, 1,350' east of the intersection of Lansdowne and North Concourse Drives, West Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: Samuel Breck, a merchant with a future in state and national politics, built Sweetbrier in 1797. Like other Philadelphians in his social and financial position, Breck wished to escape the city's late eighteenth century yellow fever epidemic and could afford to commission a stately house upriver in one of the neighboring locales. However, despite its resemblance to villas in the area, Sweetbrier was not a seasonal retreat but the Breck family's full-time residence. In order to create Fairmount Park, the City of Philadelphia purchased Sweetbrier and surrounding properties during the mid nineteenth century; the benefits of a sylvan landscape that had once attracted exclusive private development were thus extended to the public at large.

Description: Standing north of a cul-de-sac that terminates Sweetbrier Drive, Sweetbrier is a three-and-a-half story, Federal-style house built of stucco-faced rubble on a central hall plan. The southwest (front/entrance) and northeast (rear/garden) facades are five bays wide and the end walls are divided into two bays, leaving room for a third. A hip roof covers the building and supports four round-headed dormer windows on its major pitches. Two chimneys protrude from the southeast pitch, a third rises from the northwest pitch, and a fourth is located somewhat north of center. The first story employs eight-over-eight-light windows and is partially sunken below grade. Nine-over-nine-light windows illuminate the second story or piano nobile while six-over-six-light sashes fill the third-story and dormer windows. Although the front and rear facades are nearly identical, the former receives extra emphasis from a Tuscan entrance aedicula and a round-arched window with decorative muntins. Quoins enliven the corners of the building, a stringcourse separates the second and third stories and a simple cornice adorns the roofline. The interior contains extensive Federal-style woodwork including a hallway arch that resembles the entrance aedicula; the parlor mantelpieces, however, are not original. None of the numerous outbuildings described in Breck's diary or later sources remain on the site.

History: A merchant and relative newcomer to Philadelphia, Samuel Breck received roughly thirty-three acres of land as a gift from his father-in-law, John Ross, in 1796. The property lay in Blockley, a township just north of the city, where wealthy Philadelphians had been establishing rural retreats since the mid eighteenth century. The areas' Arcadian landscape clearly attracted many of these urbanites, but by the 1790s a yellow

fever epidemic in the city gave the likes of Samuel Breck an even stronger incentive; in 1797 he built Sweetbrier on his newly-acquired lot (Kopelson, p.12). An elegant Federal-style house with a lawn stretching down to the Schuylkill River, Sweetbrier had much in common with surrounding villas. Perhaps the only indication that Breck and his wife Jean occupied the estate year-round was the large number of outbuildings that dotted the property.

The Brecks lived on their rural estate for almost forty years, during which time Samuel served several terms in the Pennsylvania State Legislature and one in the U.S. Congress. As a state senator, he wrote legislation that provided for public schooling in Pennsylvania. When the Fairmount Dam was completed downriver from Sweetbrier in 1821, Breck feared that the resulting stagnant water posed a serious health risk to nearby residents. The death of his only child, Lucy, in 1828 apparently confirmed these suspicions, and in 1835 he and Jean moved back to Philadelphia. Three years later, Breck sold Sweetbrier to an ice dealer named William Torr who took advantage of the lot's river frontage by establishing the Sweetbrier Ice Company near the shoreline. Torr inhabited the mansion until 1844 and subsequently leased it to a wheelwright and an innkeeper. During the 1860s, Fillmyre's Beer Garden operated out of the building.

In 1869, the City of Philadelphia acquired Torr's property and incorporated it into Fairmount Park. Concessioners and restaurateurs frequently established their businesses in park houses during the last decades of the nineteenth century and Sweetbrier was no exception. After remodelling the mansion in 1870 for use as a children's restaurant, the City leased it to Henry Eggeling who ran the enterprise and set up a playground in the back yard. An 1875 fire caused extensive damage to the building's roof and top story but these were repaired and the restaurant function reinstated.

Sweetbrier became a museum and the headquarters of the Junior League and in 1927, bringing to an end over half a century of commercial occupancy. Following the terms of an agreement with the Fairmount Park Commission, the League promptly restored and furnished the house in collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The restoration was supervised by Erling H. Pederson, an assistant to Museum director Fiske Kimball, and entailed the removal of two porches: one built on the northeastern front during Breck's ownership, the other added to the southwestern front during the 1870 renovation. Some major interior changes included converting third-floor rooms into caretakers' quarters, removing potentially original ironwork from the hallway, adding the parlor mantles, installing new plumbing and wiring, and laying a concrete floor in the basement. While the architectural

work reached completion in 1928, landscaping efforts continued into the following year.

The Junior League vacated Sweetbrier in 1939, turning over its responsibilities to the Modern Club. The house avoided substantial modification between that time and 1975 when the City of Philadelphia restored it in preparation for the Bicentennial. In charge of this project was the architect Herbert W. Levy whose plans specified multiple repairs, the reconfiguration of several exterior openings, and the installation of climate-control, fire-detection and security systems. Levy's boldest step, however, was his decision to substitute the present roof for a hipped gambrel that was apparently added in 1870 and rebuilt after the 1875 fire. Aside from 1993 floor repairs, the house's physical fabric has undergone few changes since the Bicentennial. Traversed by railroad tracks and the Schuylkill Expressway, Sweetbrier's eastern viewshed remains the least "restorable" feature of Samuel Breck's estate.

Sources:

Kopelson, Evan. "Sweetbrier Mansion," a report compiled for University of Pennsylvania Professor Roger W. Moss, 1994; includes substantial bibliography and the following appendices: National Register nomination (also by Kopelson), annotated chain of title, eighteenth and nineteenth century insurance surveys, and a list of early views.

Levy, Herbert W. "Restoration of Sweetbrier Mansion, Built 1797." Unpublished manuscript, Fairmount Park Commission.

Sweetbrier Files, Fairmount Park Commission, Office of the Park Historian, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Historian: Aaron Wunsch, HABS Summer Historian.

ADDENDUM TO:
SWEETBRIAR
(Sweetbrier)
Fairmount Park
1 Sweetbriar Drive, West Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-1670
PA,51-PHILA,396-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:
SWEETBRIAR
Fairmount Park
1 Sweetbriar Drive, West Fairmount Park
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS PA-1670
PA, 51-PHILA, 396-

PAPER COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001